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*À propos de la musique et la guerre*

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# On Music and War

*À propos de la musique et la guerre*

Morag Josephine Grant

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- 1 The musicology of war and other forms of collective violence is a relatively new field of enquiry. Its emergence can be viewed, on the one hand, as a logical development of the turn towards explicitly political concerns in music research over the past twenty to thirty years.<sup>1</sup> On the other, it can be regarded as a musicological *pendant* to how the study of war and violence more generally has developed over roughly the same time period, marked by a move away from the celebratory and hagiographic tendencies of old-school military history towards critical military studies and a focus on the impacts of violence on individuals, be they those inflicting the violence, or those who have violence inflicted upon them (most combatants, of course, are both).
- 2 My own approach to these topics starts from the same perspective I take generally as a musicologist working in what I can broadly call Kaden-school music sociology. For Christian Kaden (1946-2015), music sociology “is an inquiry into the aesthetic *and* the social potentials that are entwined in the act of making and perceiving music. It is both a historical and a systematic discipline, concerned as much with how music is socially embedded in longer-term historical processes as with the clarification of its function in different cultural systems”.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent spokespeople of the working group on sociology and social history of music which Kaden founded within the German *Gesellschaft für Musikforschung* extrapolated further in a manner very much in keeping with Kaden’s own, interdisciplinary approach:

Music sociology investigates material and conceptual value systems, mediality and structures of social behaviour, the attribution of and expectations associated with particular roles, and in particular the functions of music in everyday life, and does so both synchronically and diachronically. In doing so, interdisciplinary impetuses—for example from the fields of sociological theory, empirical social research, but also a wider spectrum ranging from religious studies to communication theory—play an important role, without ever losing sight of those aspects of the subject “music” which are specific to it and cannot be reduced to other things.<sup>3</sup>

- 3 What, then, are these irreducible elements of music, and what makes them relevant in the context of war and collective violence? And how can music sociology, thus defined, help us explore these issues?
- 4 To begin answering these questions—or rather, to indicate in what direction these answers might lie—we need first remind ourselves what the context of these investigations is. I have talked here of the musicology of “war and collective violence”, whereby collective violence is actually the superordinate category and war, in its various forms, a special case thereof—a very special case indeed, given its enormous social, political and cultural significance. War is not simply violence, although violence—the act of killing specifically—is its very heart: war is a cultural system which, since Neolithic times, has come increasingly to define the world in fundamental ways. Almost all societies in today’s world are martial cultures: that is, cultures predicated to a greater or lesser extent on the possibility of war and on the collective memory of war. In some martial cultures, war becomes so fundamental to the political and social structures of the society in question that war is inevitably produced by these societies. Thus, systems developed originally—we can hypothesise—to enable societies to defend themselves just as most animals defend their territory and their young, become so entrenched in these societies politically, economically, and morally, that they bring about the very thing they claim to be defending against.<sup>4</sup>
- 5 Recognising the cultural rather than “natural” foundations of war is of fundamental importance for understanding the roles of music in war. Equally important is emphasising, again, the collective nature of violence in war. Collective violence—which we could also term intergroup violence—has specific structural and organisational features and dynamics which set it off from forms of violence not committed in the context or in the name of a group. Definitive for collective violence is not that acts of violence are necessarily carried out by a group, but that matters of group identity, and ingroup/outgroup dynamics specifically, define why the violence is carried out. Thus, what is sometimes erroneously termed “lone-wolf” terrorism is generally also a form of collective violence, since both the motivation and the socio-psychological mechanisms at play situate it within a script of attacking one group in defence of the other. Joe Stroud’s discussion of how the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik used music in preparation for the mass murder of 77 people and the injuring of several hundreds more is particularly pertinent here: Breivik’s own manifesto showed him anticipating the use of music to allay his fears during the attack itself, but also contained references to specific artists and genres that consolidated his identity as a white supremacist.<sup>5</sup> Collective violence is rooted in collective practices, practices which do not necessarily lead to violence but which can provide the emotional bedrock for turning ideology into action.<sup>6</sup>
- 6 Musical practices are very often collective practices, and thus specific forms of collective experience: in the act of singing, playing or listening to and moving with music in the company of others, but also, at a distance, through the sense of sung or felt rather than purely imagined communities that particular pieces of music engender where they have become symbolically connected to, and expressive of, particular collective identities. In both these cases, but particularly in the former, to collectively experience music is to enact collectivity itself, and simultaneously to have collectivity enacted upon one, thanks to the processes known as entrainment which are arguably one of the most significant and fundamental aspects of music and musicality per se.<sup>7</sup>

Whether actively keeping together in time, or simply being together in time through the uniting force of a common music—such as an anthem, or other type of group song—the potential of musicality and musical communication for collective identity cannot be overstated, though it is often overlooked.

- 7 Sociological studies of collective action and collective violence by Randall Collins, Charles Tilly and others provide ample theoretical underpinnings as regards the importance of group structure, group dynamics, and group rituals in the enabling of group violence.<sup>8</sup> Here, for example, is Collins' description of what he terms solidarity rituals, which he regards as fundamental for understanding the dynamism of social movements:

The ingredients are: first, assembling people bodily in the same place, so that they are in full multi-modal intercommunication; second, focusing their attention on the same thing and becoming mutually aware of each other's focus, thereby generating a sense of intersubjectivity; and third, feeling and expressing the same emotion. Interaction rituals can succeed or fail, can be intense or mediocre; if the ingredients pass a threshold, mutual focus and shared emotion feed back into each other, driving them upwards to high levels of rhythmic entrainment that Durkheim called collective effervescence. At these high levels, what the group focuses upon becomes symbolic, representing membership in the group as well as depicting its boundaries and enemies. Individuals are filled with emotional energy, the feelings of confidence and enthusiasm that motivate them to acts of heroism and sacrifice. They are filled with a sense of morality, the palpable experience of good and its fight against evil.<sup>9</sup>

- 8 It is easy to see how music fits into this muster, though it is not something that Collins appears to have considered—and in this, he is far from alone. Nevertheless, along with the anthropology of war and armed conflict, studies like these are highlighting the multifaceted performativity of war, and the communicative nature of violence itself.<sup>10</sup> Such research is also a plea for a greater understanding of the cultural contingency of acts of violence: this includes how certain acts come to be defined as violence while others do not, and how some forms of violence, in some situations, become morally or legally acceptable while others remain outside accepted codes of behaviour.<sup>11</sup> In this normative sense, too, violence and the collective come to be linked.
- 9 War is a case in point of how cultures sanction and enable acts that in other contexts would be deemed illegal, while simultaneously struggling to contain them within these contexts. Many researchers—including Collins—have argued that the act of inflicting serious violence on another human being is in most cases profoundly unnatural;<sup>12</sup> and while there are significant exceptions to this rule, the very existence of so many and such complex cultural systems and practices for organising, justifying and mythologising war—and very often, this includes drawing attention as far as possible away from the act of killing at war's heart—is just one indication of how high the stakes are. The fact that war is brutal, and at the same time highly ritualised, is not a contradiction: rituals enable the brutality (both in the sense of inflicting it, but also subjecting oneself to it), and ritual is also needed to contain the brutality and give it meaning. Hence the large number of rituals of war which historically have marked off the combat zone as a separate, even liminal space, and mark combatants themselves off from civilians. Hence, too, the importance of collective honouring of those who have fought, and in particular, those who have acted bravely or killed most effectively within the agreed limits, and those who themselves were killed. Notably, rituals of war in the modern world have not yet caught up with the fact that since the twentieth

century, more civilians than combatants have died in war; in fact, as I have argued elsewhere, the demise in many of these rituals and the dramatic changes in attitudes to civilians in war that lead to these statistics may be linked.<sup>13</sup>

- 10 From the perspective of music sociology, music can function as a catalyst, a channel and a frame for collective experience and meaning-making. And these capacities of musical activities and practices are what make them such important strategic tools before, during, and after war. Without giving special significance to the act of killing in war, and without consecrating death in war as the supreme sacrifice—even the term reeks of ritual—wars could hardly be justified. On a more directly strategic level, rituals which mark off and give meaning to combat are essential psychological responses to the trauma combat almost inevitably entails; and, where music is used on the battlefield itself—as was once common—it can serve as a focus and as an ordering mechanism which keeps troops together in the very moment when they are most likely to succumb to panic.<sup>14</sup> Long after ceasefire, music continues to play an oftentimes fundamental role in celebrating or commemorating wars and warriors, thus functioning as a fundamental toolkit for collective memory which itself, all too often, becomes mobilised in the service of wars yet to come.
- 11 To focus on music as a framing and ordering device, and on its roles in meaning-making; to situate music's effects squarely within the context of collective identity and collective action; in other words, to understand the connection between music and war *socially*: this flies in the face of a tendency still found in some discussions of music and war to emphasise the brute force qualities of musical sound itself. Neoplatonic, magic bullet-style causal explanations which attribute to music the ability to trigger or unleash certain emotions (such as aggression) which are regarded as essential for committing acts of violence (they are not) can be understood as an attempt to distance ourselves, and music, from the fact that war is an integral part of our civilisation, and that more often than not it abides by civilisation's codes (codes that, after all, allow for war and often actively promote it). There are societies without war, but most of what passes in the past and present for "great" civilisations have been profoundly martial in nature. Western musical aesthetics have conspired to create the idea of a divide between a cultured, rational taste for music, and the way in which "lower" classes and races react to music: instinctively, emotionally. In the prevailing ideology of western civilisation, such a division between this civilised "us" and a barbarian "other" is often propagated in times of war, but also filters through into how we think about music and its relationship to action more generally.
- 12 An approach to the musicology of war which, in Kaden's sense, is both historical and systematic, is well placed to contribute to the wider project of understanding how we came to be so dependent on war for our ideas of who we are; for our economic systems; and for our activities in the fields of art and culture. A historical and comparative perspective on this issue seems to me particularly pertinent, and the historical record certainly makes it abundantly clear that, as far back as we can see, where there is war there is also music. And why should this surprise us, since both are such integral aspects of human society?

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## NOTES

1. I say "explicitly political" because musicology and its disciplinary forebears have always been underpinned by political beliefs and agendas, no more so than when they deny any link at all between music and the political.
2. Christian Kaden, quoted in KALISCH Volker, HERR Corinna, "Positionspapier der Fachgruppe Soziologie und Sozialgeschichte der Musik", <https://www.musikforschung.de/index.php/en/field-units/soziologie-und-sozialgeschichte-der-musik/183-positionspapier-der-fachgruppe-soziologie-und-sozialgeschichte-der-musik>, accessed 30 August 2019; my translation.
3. KALISCH and HERR, "Positionspapier", my translation.
4. A pertinent example is the speed with which the doctrine of Christianity was adapted to make it amenable to the warrior cultures of Europe, cultures in which performance in war was integral to the honour system of the nobility.
5. STROUD Joe, "The Importance of Music to Anders Behring Breivik", *Journal of Terrorism Research*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2013, pp. 5-18.

6. For a fuller discussion of this issue as it pertains to racist violence, see GRANT M. J., “Musical Communication, ‘Hate Speech’, and Human Rights Law”, GEPHART Werner, LEKO Jure (eds.), *Law and the Arts: Elective Affinities and Relationships of Tension*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 2017, pp. 217-250.
7. Entrainment here refers to the ways in which processes come into time with one another. Humans appear to be almost unique in the animal kingdom in the way they frequently and proactively act in time with others, especially in the behaviours we call music (and closely related activities, especially dance). Entrainment however more properly refers to how at subconscious levels as well, our bodily systems come into synch with one another and how we unconsciously and not just consciously come “into time” with others in our presence. Processes of keeping in time with others have proved fundamentally important in the context of martial and military organisations, as the prevalence of war dances and their modern western equivalents, marching and drill, testify.
8. COLLINS Randall, *Violence: A Sociological Theory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008; “Time-bubbles of Nationalism: Dynamics of Solidarity Ritual in Lived Time”, *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 18, no. (3), 2012, pp. 383-397; TILLY Charles, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
9. COLLINS, “Time-bubbles of nationalism”, p. 387.
10. See here especially SCHRÖDER Ingo W., SCHMIDT Bettina E., “Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices”, SCHMIDT Bettina E., SCHRÖDER Ingo W. (eds.), *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 1-24.
11. JACKMAN Mary, “Violence in Social Life”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 28, 2002, pp. 387-415.
12. An exception is that inflicting violence on one perceived as weaker appears to be much easier than inflicting it on one of equal strength or standing. Collins recognises this, but does not, in my opinion, sufficiently consider the broader significance of this in light of what we know to be high levels of relationship violence and violence against children. This is too complex a topic to enter into here, except to say that a mix of innate and cultural factors may be at play here: to attack the weak makes sense in terms of personal survival, but who is encoded as “weak” or subordinate/inferior is culturally conditioned.
13. GRANT M. J., “Chaos and Order: Issues in the Historiography of Martial Music”, STROHM Reinhard (ed.), *Transcultural Music History: Global Participation and Regional Diversity in the Modern Age*, Berlin, Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag (forthcoming).
14. GRANT M. J., “Bagpipes at the Front: Pipers and Piping During Combat in the Great War”, SCHRAMM Michael (ed.), *Militärmusik und Erster Weltkrieg*, Bonn, Militärmusikzentrum der Bundeswehr, 2015, pp. 35-67; GRANT M. J., “Chaos and Order”.



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## ABSTRACTS

The musicology of war and collective violence is a relatively young field, and appropriate theoretical frameworks for this research are still emerging. Here, an approach is outlined which, in keeping with the programme for music sociology outlined by Christian Kaden, is both systematic and historical in its approach. Perspectives from the sociology of violence (Randalls Collins, Charles Tilly) can help us understand the dynamics of collective violence, and thus the role of music within it. War is a cultural rather than natural phenomenon, and music plays significant roles in the rituals which enable wars to happen.

La musicologie de la guerre et de la violence collective est un champ d'étude relativement jeune, et les cadres théoriques ajustés à ces recherches sont encore en cours d'élaboration. Ici, une approche à la fois systématique et historique est esquissée, conformément au programme de sociologie de la musique proposé par Christian Kaden. Les perspectives de la sociologie de la violence (Randall Collins, Charles Tilly) peuvent nous aider à comprendre la dynamique de la violence collective et, par-là, le rôle qu'y joue la musique. La guerre est un phénomène culturel plutôt que naturel et la musique remplit des fonctions importantes dans les rituels qui permettent aux guerres de se produire.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** guerre, violence collective, sociologie de la musique, sociologie de la violence, anthropologie de la guerre, rituels de guerre

**Keywords:** war, collective violence, music sociology, sociology of violence, anthropology of war, rituals of war

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M. J. Grant's current research interests focuses on the musicology of war and collective violence, including torture. Other interests include the social functions of songs and singing; new and experimental art music since 1950; music and law. From 2008-2014 she led the research group "Music, Conflict and the State" at the University of Göttingen. She has received multiple research awards and fellowships to support her work. She teaches musicology at the University of Edinburgh.